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Support Culturally Responsive Teaching!

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In My View

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Support Culturally Responsive Teaching!

by Janine Martins-Shannon
and Meg White



This was Haamed's first year in the school, after recently moving with his family from South Africa to the United States. Every morning, Haamed would walk into the classroom and stop at Mrs. Stout's desk. If she was busy, he patiently waited until she was finished. He would let out a big smile, say "good morning," and then walk to his desk. During the day, when another adult entered the classroom, he would stand up beside his desk until that person left the room.

The other students thought this was funny, and each day it became

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more entertaining. Haamed seemed increasingly hurt by the laughter. Why were they laughing? And why were the other students not standing with him? A visit from the child's father resulted in Mrs. Stout's understanding that in South African schools, it is a sign of respect for students to greet the teacher upon entering the classroom and to stand when an adult comes into the room. When the students were made aware of the cultural difference, the laughter stopped.

Had Mrs. Stout earlier been more aware of Haamed's cultural norms, she could have taken advantage of an opportunity to teach students about another country and culture—in a much more meaningful way than pointing to a country on the map. Most importantly, her cultural awareness not only would have prevented Haamed from being embarrassed by his fellow classmates, but also may have made him feel welcomed in his new classroom.

Within today's changing society, teachers must meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Beyond

cultural awareness, teachers must identify cultural implications and modify instructional approaches to address both the students' academic and cultural needs. To do so will create culturally responsive classrooms and promote student success (Cartledge and Kourea 2008).

What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as understanding students' prior experiences and learning styles, as well as using cultural knowledge to ensure that learning is appropriate to culturally diverse learners. It is vital for teachers to consider cultural characteristics that influence a student's learning style (Hammond, Dupoux, and Ingalls 2004).

Teaching that addresses a student's cultural traditions affects not only the learning process, but also the student's self-efficacy—the student's belief in his or her ability to achieve a specified goal (Bandura 1977). Even though his classmates were laughing at him, Haamed demonstrated strong self-efficacy by maintaining his cultural beliefs through his

Resources for Culturally Responsive Classrooms

For more information on culturally responsive classrooms:

www.intime.uni.edu/multiculture/curriculum/culture/teaching.htm

An article that reviews the need for and importance of culturally responsive classrooms.

www.nccrest.org/Briefs/Diversity_Brief.pdf

A practitioner brief on addressing diversity in schools.

www.culturallyresponsive.org

Professional development suggestions and professional resources for teachers.

www.tolerance.org/activity/nurturing-optimal-classroom-community-culturally-responsive

Guidelines for a 30-minute professional development seminar for teachers on culturally responsive conflict resolution.

For more information on classroom activities related to multiculturalism:

www.proteacher.com/090031.shtml

Lesson plans and activities for elementary and middle school classrooms.

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/ect/placetobegin.htm>

Ideas for the PreK–2 classroom.

www.edchange.org/multicultural/activityarch.html

Icebreakers, exercises, and strategies.

<http://education.byu.edu/diversity/activities.html>

Diversity activities to allow students to have new experiences and express their feelings.

<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/Multi.html>

A guide to multicultural education Web sites.

www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/multi_new/activities.html

Activities for multicultural education courses and workshops for preservice and in-service teachers.

continual demonstration of respect. Had he not had such strong self-efficacy, his behavior might have included disruptive components, which then would have inhibited his overall academic success.

Incorporate Cultures into Lessons

Teachers with an awareness and understanding of culturally responsive teaching practices will begin incorporating various cultures, languages, and traditions into lessons. By addressing cultural and ethnic norms reflected within a group of culturally diverse students, teachers can support student success.

What does this look like in the classroom? Consider this example. Many African-American or American-Indian students have first names that have cultural significance (Rasool and Curtis 2000). As part of a lesson, teachers can integrate an assignment in which students research the country where their name originated or the name itself. This assignment, which can be completed by all ethnicities, will heighten participation and involvement in a nonthreatening manner and create a more cohesive classroom community. To further support

the classroom environment, teachers can extend this assignment by adding a component in which the class creates a name quilt.

To effectively create a culturally responsive classroom, teachers must understand various ethnic groups, norms, and expectations. Within each culture is a system of values, standards for academic achievement, social taboos, methods of communication, motivation, and learning styles. For instance, a Hispanic teenage girl looks to her mother's sister for guidance and support; so in addition to the parents, a maternal aunt might be a key person to involve in a conversation regarding the child's academic needs. A young Asian child may appear to be shy and introverted; in reality, the child is trying not to draw attention to himself. To engage him in the learning experience, teachers might incorporate a collaborative group assignment, perhaps using the Jigsaw method, in which all students have individual roles to play.

Although born and raised in the United States, Iriff comes from a Philippine family that strictly adheres to cultural norms and expectations. During class discussions, Iriff assumes what

appears to be a passive role and allows her classmates to speak before she does. Within her culture, allowing others to speak first is a way of being respectful toward the other students. When teachers pose questions to the class, Iriff does not raise her hand, even though she knows the answer. To give Iriff an individual opportunity to respond, the teacher poses a question directly to her. Another way to afford all students individual response time is with the Popsicle® method, in which individual student names are written on Popsicle sticks for the teacher's selection.

In some situations, a student's home culture may clearly clash with the school culture. For example, a Mexican father might consider it offensive for his son to participate in kindergarten activities that involve domestic play. A Muslim father might request a change in seating for his daughter because of gender. With awareness, teachers can easily accommodate these cultural differences. To support a strong home-school connection, teachers can involve parents by inviting them into the classroom to read a story about the culture of their native country, discuss the importance

of certain clothing, or bring a traditional food to share.

Overcome Stereotypes

Teachers in a culturally responsive classroom are proactive in overcoming stereotypes. Nieto (2004) highlighted this important goal: build a cohesive learning environment without creating stereotypes. In this environment, awareness, respect, and mutual understanding are incorporated within learning activities to encourage students to be more accepting and tolerant of one another's differences (Rasool and Curtis 2000).

A classroom activity to bust the myths of cultural stereotypes might involve identifying and correcting false assumptions. To begin, the entire class works together to determine several subsets or races of people that are often stereotyped (e.g., men, women, smart kids, Asian children). Then, working in groups, students within each group write one of the subsets or races on a large sheet of paper and list associated stereotypes. Next, papers are exchanged until each group has a chance to write on each sheet.

The papers are displayed for everyone to see, and a class discussion focuses on asking students what similarities and differences they notice about each list, how each subset or race is portrayed in society, and how common stereotypes might cause someone to judge or act unfairly toward members of these subsets or races. Building awareness of stereotypes in this way allows students to move toward changing their perceptions.

Make the Classroom Inclusive

Another way that teachers can make their classrooms culturally responsive is by applying their understanding of inclusive instruction through the use of workstations. These workstations, which can be incorporated into various content areas, may focus on several ethnic groups

each month. Activities may concentrate on specific content areas and include music, languages, literature, art, architectural designs, cuisine, and other related interests. Decorating workstations can be assigned to several students within specific ethnic groups, thereby allowing these groups to interact and participate without stigmas or stereotypes.

For diverse students, an inclusive and culturally responsive classroom represents a direction toward success. In this environment, all students have opportunities to express themselves freely during class discussions. For example, as part of a lesson on land formations or weather, students can discuss their experiences with diverse geographic locations or varied weather systems. Within a comfortable setting, culturally diverse students are included in a discussion in which they can share their family experiences and native origins in relation to the content. And, of course, all students are enriched by this firsthand transmission of content about other cultures and places.

Reflect for Success

How do teachers begin making the transition to a culturally responsive classroom that supports academic success for all students? Reflecting on personal awareness is an excellent place to start. Teachers can use a reflective evaluation to reveal any biases or cultural restraints they may have that could hinder student success. Following are some questions to aid reflection:

- Does your classroom reflect open-mindedness to the various cultures of your students?
- Does the physical environment have examples that illustrate cultural diversity so that all students feel accepted as part of the classroom community?
- Do discussion questions posed reflect cultural awareness appropriate to the

students within the classroom?

- Does the literature in your classroom provide appropriate representations of different cultures?
- Do you encourage a sense of family?
- Do you have activities (e.g., guest speakers, studies of countries and geography, food, cultures, languages) that incorporate different families and cultures into your classroom?
- Do you use heterogeneous grouping (Bae and Clark 2005) in cooperative learning settings?

Teachers who consider their own responses to these questions can begin to expand their thinking about cultural diversity. Armed with this awareness, they can implement changes to make their classrooms more culturally responsive.

Closing Thoughts

The demographics in the United States are changing to include an increasing number of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Accordingly, schools must offer learning environments that welcome ethnically diverse students, practice culturally responsive teaching, and promote academic success for all students. Continued research on the relationship between culturally responsive classrooms and successful outcomes for learners will help facilitate this transition. ■

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